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ABSTRACT

Discussion of the establishment of a single language for Europe's many countries and cultures focuses on the debate over English versus Esperanto as the language of choice. It is argued that the notion that language has not been a major barrier to intellectual exchange is a myth. In addition, while the main European political institutions support multilingualism, the situation does not preclude establishing a single second language. Issues in developing language policy for a newly unified Europe include the geographic and political territory it must cover, the roles envisioned for the language chosen, and its learnability. English is the strongest contender because of its international preeminence and current widespread use. However, international English is composed of a large number of varieties, not all of which are internationally stable or considered legitimate. The argument in favor of Esperanto, on the other hand, is based on issues of principle rather than linguistic status. As a planned language, Esperanto is more easily learned than an unplanned national language, and it is also politically neutral. Lexically and historically, Esperanto is a European language. It is concluded that while English has historical dominance, Esperanto is dynamic and can play a larger role in future. (MSE)

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EUROPE'S BABYLON: TOWARDS A SINGLE EUROPEAN LANGUAGE?

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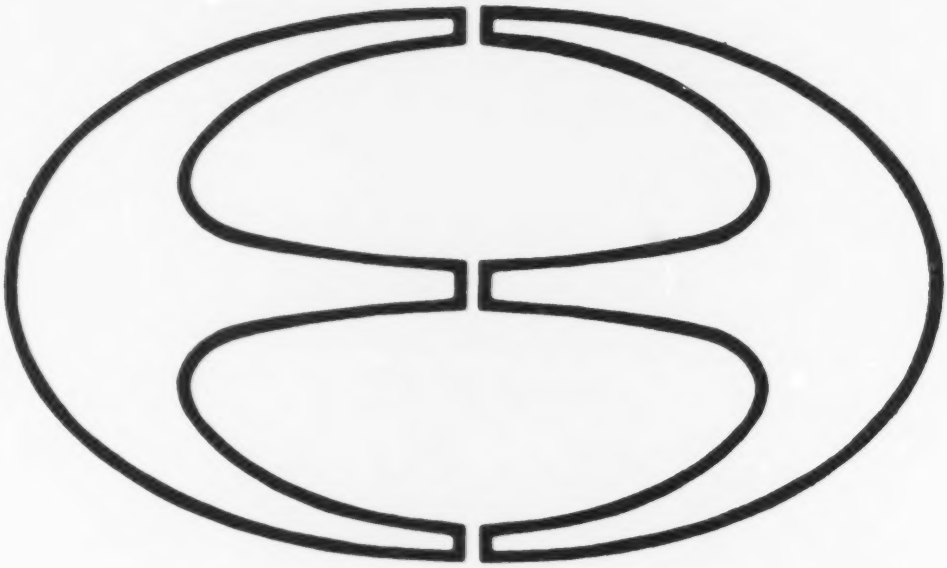

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EUROPE'S BABYLON: TOWARDS A SINGLE EUROPEAN LANGUAGE?

Mark Fettes

> "My conclusion is that the problem of a language for international communication presents itself as the conflict between a planned language, Esperanto, which is known to function to the satisfaction of its users, and a hegemonic national language, which, as we all know, is, today, English."
>
> André Martinet (1989)

There may be readers of this essay who, on encountering the above statement, have already raised a surprised or sceptical eyebrow. To set Esperanto, associated in most people's minds with a woolly and basically unsuccessful utopianism rather than with everyday reality, on the same conceptual level as the leviathan of World English may seem to be carrying the debate beyond the bounds of relevancy. Indeed the mainstream of European linguistic discourse during the past century has taken exactly this position. I shall try to show in this essay why this is so, how the relevant factors may be changing, and that the two poles of the debate identified by Martinet in fact give a very fruitful perspective into the problems of second-language communication. Although Martinet may have had in mind a world rather than a European context when he made the above statement, the debate is essentially the same: What is the role of rationalism in human affairs, more particularly with regard to the political, cultural and psychological dimensions of language? These are vast issues; we shall here be limited to sketching the field of battle which separates Esperanto's David from English's Goliath, and gathering a few useful shards from the missiles that the two combatants hurl overhead.

It may be useful to start by reminding ourselves of the reality of the language problem in Europe. Like many aspects of its inheritance from pre-history, Europe's Babylon often escapes critical attention: we rarely stop to confront much-parroted assumptions of continuity in European thought and culture with realities 'on the ground'. According to the prevailing myth, intellectual exchange has for centuries presented few problems for individuals working in the

mainstream of European thought; but who can say what potential connections, what leaps of kindred spirit have been obscured by the tangle of European tongues? Today this is no longer a problem for a small, relatively polyglot elite. More people than ever before, with the development of scientific and cultural cooperation, trade and travel, are being brought face to face without being able to talk to one another. A recent survey concluded that 'truly correct comprehension of the English language [in Western Europe] . . . falls noticeably beneath our most pessimistic expectations' in being limited to some 6% of the population (Van de Sandt 1989); other languages are presumably doing less well, and the figures for active competence would be still lower. What does it mean to speak of a united Europe, when a random cross-section of its citizens placed together in a single room would have little hope of reaching common understanding on anything except, perhaps, the desirability of getting out?

On the other hand, of course, language diversity has brought with it enormous riches. The semi-autonomous development of each national culture (within which can nourish many distinct regional and social variations) depends fundamentally on the sheltering wall of language. For this reason, reinforced perhaps by the natural advantage that the well-educated enjoy under a multilingual system, the advantages of unilingualism are not a popular topic except among those whose language is being considered for the role. Indeed, our theme of a 'single European language' cannot be taken to mean a single first language for the continent, unless one is interested in spinning (anti-)utopian fictions. A host of practical, ethical and political considerations can be amassed to support this view (cf. Hagège 1986).

All the main European political institutions are supporters of a policy of multilingualism. In Western Europe alone, the Council of Europe, the European Commission, the European Parliament and the education ministers of the EC member countries have all accepted, within the last few years, resolutions in favour of 'linguistic pluralism' and the increased teaching of Community languages – at the expense, naturally enough, of extra-Community languages. It is debatable, indeed, whether even the relatively modest goal of instructing three (out of nine) EC languages to every citizen is feasible or worthwhile, given the experience of foreign language teaching to date (Chiti-Batelli 1988, pp. 57-91). Yet multilingualism remains the only policy acceptable to all the EC nations, and the same would undoubtedly be true of the rest of Europe.

This situation does not necessarily rule out the establishing of a single *second* language, however. Indeed, the issue runs like a continuous thread through post-Enlightenment European history (Large 1985, pp. 43-63). Behind it lie the shadows of the Roman empire and the medieval Church, facing parchments

pointing to a lost (and half-imagined) linguistic unity; and the later dreams of a language of universal comprehension (Knowlson 1975). Yet these are shadows and dreams, no more: other, more ill-defined forces now bind and shape the continent, and for them the ancient military language turned liturgical and scholarly medium, or the tentative linguistic gropings of Wilkins and his peers bear little relevance.

It is indeed by no means certain what sort of process European unification is, or what consequences it will have for language policy. Pragmatic national economic motives (themselves an important force for unilingualism) work side by side with internationalism and 'Euronationalism', which itself may be inspired by romantic visions of past glory, isolationist longings for self-definition or neo-colonialist determination to hold on to as large a slice of the world pie as possible. Some states may even seek protective legitimacy within the EC against internal secessionist tendencies (Spain and Catalonia come to mind). The very geographical definition of Europe is unclear, with all that it may entail for the establishment of common working languages and the practicality of the EC principle of linguistic equality (which with nine languages is already straining at the seams). Consideration of our illustrative candidates for a single European language therefore starts with a caveat on the definition of Europe itself. The roles envisaged for such a language depend crucially on the social and political context; a Europe of 30 nations may need other solutions than the Europe of the Twelve, a Europe of 80 nations others again.

Two further types of linguistic constraint seem relevant. These concern the 'depth' of function required of a single European language. First, what roles would it play in European society? Given that very few Europeans would wish to see their language diversity disappear, a functional separation would have to exist between the 'interlanguage' and the local languages. It seems equally unacceptable for such a language to be limited to a particular class or group of professions, a sort of 'Euroelite' (although this is in fact exactly what the present policy of multilingualism in effect legitimises). Finally, the links between language and culture are so close that it would be futile to conceive of a language used 'purely' for the exchange of information. If these interests seem to conflict in the case of a given language, it is necessary to ask whether it can in fact function as a stable universal lingua franca.

The other, related factor concerns the learnability of the language, given that it must be a second, non-native tongue (a true European bilingualism seeming so far off as to be beyond the consideration of this essay). We must first remember that internal dynamics of individual language communities are extraordinarily varied, even within the relatively limited range of languages

we are dealing with here. The at times almost fanatical pursuit of purism in the French language stands in sharp contrast to the relaxed word-borrowing of its Northern neighbour Dutch; the stubborn resistance of British English to spelling or grammatical reform is at another pole from the trim consistencies of Spanish or Estonian. Czech, deep in the heart of Europe, is unique in terms of the pronounced differences between its spoken and written idioms. One could go on in greater detail, but it should already be evident that, at the level of the vernacular, Europe has nothing like a common linguistic tradition. Trained professionals can of course rid themselves to some extent of the unconscious biases induced during mastery of their native tongue. Most users of a single second European language would, however, have little or no such training; for them the lingua franca would risk bringing with it a feeling of alienness, almost wrongness, at those points where its behaviour clashed with their folk-linguistic beliefs.

We have, in fact, touched on the problem of irreducible differences between languages which George Steiner made the central focus of his study on (principally European) translation, *After Babel* (1975). Such differences do not of course make the learning of a second tongue impossible, even to a level characteristic of the native speaker. But they set severe limits on what can be achieved without total immersion in the relevant linguistic environment. Steiner comments with regard to 'technically proficient' Japanese students of English: 'So much that is being said is correct, so little is right' (1975, p. 470). We need to ask what degree of 'rightness' is achievable, and what is required, in a European lingua franca which is not the native tongue of its speakers.

The above considerations are meant to indicate that, if we are to take the concept of a single European language seriously, we should be prepared to demand the utmost of it. It must function satisfactorily at a spoken as well as a written level, be open to reasonably equal participation by all Europeans (however the concept is defined), and be able to express the full range of transnational European thought in a manner that is felt to be satisfactory by the speaker. Any language which fulfils these criteria only in part is but one 'European language', major or minor depending on its usage, but not possessed of a unique status.

The greater part of this essay consists of an examination of the extent to which English and Esperanto, at their respective poles, respond to these demands. The first is an unplanned ethnic language with upwards of 300 million native speakers, including more than 50 million within Europe itself; its qualifications rest heavily on the status quo and an appeal to economic verities. The second has developed through a century of limited but international use, from a

relatively strictly planned foundation into the living human tongue of a 'voluntary, non-ethnic, non-territorial speech community' (Wood 1979), based largely in Europe, in which native speakers play a statistically negligible role. I do not wish to imply that these two languages are the only possible candidates for a single European language, but only that they adequately define the range of kinds of solution that might be tried.

English is today, by common consent, the strongest contender for a language which can be used almost anywhere, whether in Europe or elsewhere; Martinet's phrase 'as we all know' hints at the triviality of the assumption. British and American colonialism and economic domination served to carry the language to the four corners of the earth; principally American technological dynamism has served to entrench its position and ensure that learning it remains a passport to a very large market and a vast range of information. Since the beginning of this century the international pre-eminence of English has become steadily more evident, to the point where some native and non-native speakers alike are prophesying its establishment as a truly universal tongue.

Intellectual reaction to this prospect has been quite diverse. A strong current of socialist thought welcomed, early on in the process, the spread of a few European languages as tending towards the integration of the world community (Lins 1987). Even conservatives, while concerned about the preservation of their own national culture and identity, often at least partially identify with the mercantile and colonialist forces behind English, as earlier they had willingly accepted French as the supreme vehicle of European enlightenment and international diplomacy. One still finds these viewpoints widely defended today, usually in terms of the benefits of unilingualism.

Such views are, however, increasingly out of step with modern awareness of the profound role of language in human affairs. One dissenting tradition has come from the linguists themselves, particularly those concerned with language 'in the field'. The following lament from a chronicler of Britain's surviving non-English tongues is typical: '. . . the only ones to which English is completely irrelevant are Pictish and Celtic Pictish, which died out in northern Scotland before English penetrated thus far. For English is a killer. . . . It is English that has killed off Cumbric, Cornish, Norn and Manx. It is English that has now totally replaced Irish as a first language in Northern Ireland. And it is English that constitutes such a major threat to Welsh and to Scottish Gaelic, and to French in the Channel Islands, that their long-term future must be considered to be very greatly at risk. . . . One can only speculate, but unprofitably, as to whether, a hundred years from now, the islands of Britain will, to their inestimable loss, have lapsed into (for 'achieved' is not the word) an unenviable

linguistic uniformity that they have not known since their recorded history began'. (Price 1984, p. 170 and p. 241). While the situation in Europe is not so advanced, the same words might be echoed by many at the prospect of English extending its hegemony there.

The development of nationalism into a guiding ideology for over 160 independent states has also had its consequences. In 1945 it was impossible for the nascent United Nations to restrict itself to two official languages, English and French, as the League of Nations had been able to do. By 1965 and the founding of the European Community, it was felt necessary to guarantee the language of every member state an equal status under the European Charter – even though it was evident from the outset that some languages would be 'more equal than others' when it came to the practical day-to-day running of Community affairs. As it is, the UN is under constant pressure from major language groups not included in the present dispensation, while two member states of the EC, Ireland and Luxemburg, have had to agree not to press for equal status for their own minor official languages.

Political declarations do not, however, always have much effect on everyday reality. It is very difficult to obtain reliable statistics on the use of English as a second language, in Europe or elsewhere: the natural fluidity of linguistic communication and the difficulties of establishing criteria militate against such data. Yet there is no doubt that English is perceived as a high-prestige, high-use language whose acquisition brings immediate gain to the user. Some 99% of Dutch high school graduates have studied English as their main foreign language; figures elsewhere in Europe, while lower, are still higher than those for any other language. Some command of written English, at least, is necessary for many professions, most notably in the natural sciences. It is perhaps going too far to assert, as does George Steiner, that English seems 'to embody for men and women throughout the world – and particularly for the young – the "feel" of hope, of material advance, of scientific and empirical procedures' (1975, p. 468). For the majority of young Europeans, one suspects, English is seen rather as the language of MacDonald's and Hollywood, of quick and relatively cheap gratification with little substance behind it. The alleged ease of learning English, which as any second-language teacher can attest extends only to the most basic, tense-free, idiom-free levels of the language, if anything must reinforce this attitude. Steiner himself speaks of 'a thin wash, marvellously fluid, but without adequate base' (1975, p. 470).

For an illuminating perspective on this lack of base we can turn to another polyglot linguist, in a country where English already functions as a national lingua franca. Dasgupta (1988) sketches in a thought-provoking study some

possible reasons for the creative differences between Sanskrit in its heyday, between about 500 and 1000 A.D., and Indian English today. The great writers of Sanskrit were working at a time when it had no native speakers in any part of India, existing purely as a learned, 'artificial' form of communication. Present-day English, by contrast, remains tied to a 'naturalist' folk linguistics embodied by the existence of 300 million native speakers around the world. Dasgupta argues that for the bi- or trilingual Indian English speaker it is impossible to feel English as a 'natural' tongue: the choice implied by speaking or writing it is too real, too present, no matter how fluent that person's command of technical details may be. The result is a creative stalemate: 'While English is in power in India, Indian English is not legitimate within the world of English; this international ambiguity . . . ensures that the troubles Rajeev Patke has diagnosed in his article [i.e. the lack of first-class creative work in English within India itself] are going to persist for a long time to come' (Dasgupta 1988, p. 25).

While this remark is concerned specifically with the Indian case, it bears on a much more general problem which was touched on earlier. Any society which expresses its indigenous culture in a language other than English is faced with a similar functional contrast between the 'interlanguage' and the native one. Experience suggests that this can not only cut off English from indigenous creative roots, but also prove unstable. The last few years have seen a wholly unexpected linguistic revolution in the Philippines, where English has been abruptly displaced from its high-prestige public role by Tagalog (Branegan 1989). One can easily imagine similar upsets taking place in many developing nations, linked with an assertion of national self-identity or – perhaps – with a decline in the dominance of English on the world scene.

The relevance of all this to the European context is far from marginal. English is indeed the language of a European nation, and it might thus be argued that its semantics, or even its grammar, hew closer to the common cultural grain in Europe than in India or the Philippines. Yet its geographical and linguistic base remains at the periphery. The countries which have most successfully assimilated English into daily life are the neighbours: Ireland (all too effectively, as far as the native tongue is concerned), the Netherlands, Sweden and the rest of Scandinavia. West Germany trails behind; the French are either indifferent or obstinately opposed. Beyond Northern Europe the position of English is no stronger than in many other parts of the world: it is an important language, but local cultural and political ties will often outweigh it even in that proportion of the population which is polylingual.

And what of English's status in those countries where it is widely accepted

as the second language? The visitor to the Netherlands will soon be aware of the pressure of English on daily life: television, radio and print bring it into every home and the schoolyard conversations of children; advertisers use it to pep up their message, journalists take refuge in it when their home-bred skills fail them. Occasionally one hears the extreme view that Dutch will give place to English as the national tongue within two generations. Yet to the extemal English-speaking observer, all this seems supeificial. Dutch knowledge of English is far more often passive than active, tuned towards understanding films and texts rather than producing the films and texts themselves. By the same token, it rarely goes beyond Steiner's 'thin wash'. Dutch pop groups often perform in English, but Dutch actors rarely do so and Dutch writers (naturally!) never do. Sales of a Dutch translation from an English original far exceed those of the original itself.

All this strongly supports an extension of Dasgupta's thesis on second language creativity to the European situation, and reminds us that there is nothing assured about the position of English today. A language must continually be learned by generation after generation in order to keep its place; cultural, political or economic developments may lead rapidly to astonishing changes. The positions in Europe of Latin and, later, French must in their time have seemed impregnable. English has had the tide uninterruptedly in its favour for the past century and a half, yet the statistics of its actual use in Europe, according to the study cited earlier, are far from overwhelming (Van de Sandt 1989). In this light the failure of Sky Channel to win a significant portion of the European market comes to seem a matter not of bad luck but of inevitability. The function of English in European consciousness is not that of a popular vernacular, but of a necessary means of communication in certain well-defined situations. Participants of international conferences will readily recognise the post-meeting syndrome of groups standing animatedly chatting in their native language, when minutes before the discussion had been conducted in adequate but formal English.

If political, cultural and psychological obstacles limit the extent to which English can ever become the single umbrella language of Europe, short of a totally unforeseeable loss of identity on the part of the various European peoples, then the time has come to examine the alternative offered by its opposite pole. Esperanto faces difficulties in many ways complementary to those of English, and it will be instructive to compare the two. It would be tedious and, I hope, superfluous to present the case here for treating Esperanto as a normally functioning language with an exceptional social base. Many studies of the topic are available; the articles and references in a recent addition

to the 'Trends in Linguistics' series (Schubert (ed.) 1989) provide a good guide for the interested reader. Here I shall concentrate on the aspects directly relevant to the present topic. Independently of Esperanto's chances of success, the issues raised in the discussion appear to bear sharply and directly on the problem as a whole.

If English's candidacy makes a pragmatic appeal to its present position with little attempt at any justification on linguistic grounds, Esperanto bases its arguments on matters of principle. Its two main classic theses hark back to the optimistic rationalism of the Enlightenment, and have been restated on many occasions and in many ways within the movement's 100-year history. A planned language is by its very nature more easily learned than an unplanned national language; claims for Esperanto range from one-fourth to one-twentieth of the time required to master a 'natural' language to an equivalent level (Sherwood and Cheng 1980). And a planned language, assuming that it is truly autonomous in its functioning and development, offers the political advantage of neutrality. We shall examine these claims and their implications more closely in a moment.

The first important thing to note, however, is the quite different grounds on which the two languages make their stand. Esperanto has indeed little of material worth to pit against the massive industry of English as a Second Language. The largest Esperanto organisation in the world, the Universal Esperanto Association, has fewer than 50,000 members, and it is unlikely that the total population of active speakers exceeds ten times this number; the total number of published works runs to about 250 a year, the number of significant periodicals in the language currently stands at about half that. There is no reason to consider these figures insignificant, since speaking Esperanto is an entirely voluntary act almost devoid of material incentives; how many speakers of English as a second language would one expect to find in similar circumstances? Yet it means that Esperanto advocates are forced to base their arguments on potentialities rather than hard realities, a message which inevitably has a limited audience (cf. Large 1985, 197-201).

There are other, more subtle reasons why Esperanto has remained outside the mainstream of European discourse for over a century, despite the surprising sophistication of its cultural and intellectual base. Claude Piron, a Geneva psychologist and one of the movement's foremost present ideologues, has argued that Esperanto awakens deep unconscious anxieties in many monolinguals: 'When one explores the psychological reactions evoked by the word "Esperanto", it is striking to discover how many people cannot tolerate the idea that the language might be, in certain respects, superior to their mother tongue. This reaction is based on an identification of language with the self:

my language is my people, my language is me; if my language is inferior, my people is inferior and so am I' (1988, p. 9). Piron's further point, that 'linguistic relations have always been power relations', echoes the independent researches of German historian Ulrich Lins, who recently published a painstakingly documented study of the suspicion, harrassment and deliberate persecution of the Esperanto movement by many totalitarian regimes, most notably in the Third Reich and in the Soviet Union under Stalin. Lins sees similar processes still at work today, albeit in an attenuated form: 'It seems that many governments do not want Esperanto to realise its full potential, because despite their lip service to international communication they wish to continue to set the conditions in which their citizens can enjoy cross-border contacts. One can consider as progress the recent addition of "the right to communicate" to the list of human rights. . . . On the other hand, Unesco will not risk offending national governments by anything other than wholly general declarations on the linguistic aspect of international communication' (1988, p. 531).

Leaving aside the motives involved, Esperanto's fundamental claims have not gone unchallenged by European intellectuals. While few have doubted the relative ease of acquiring a basic command of Esperanto, many writers, such as I. A. Richards and George Steiner, have expressed their suspicion that this apparent advantage is vitiated by certain limits to expressivity which a planned language cannot overcome. Simplifying somewhat, their accusation is equivalent to doubting the reality of the language's autonomy, which can be bestowed only by 'time and native ground' (Steiner 1975, p. 470). Such writers usually have no first-hand knowledge of Esperanto lexicography or literature and no experience at all of spoken Esperanto (Verloren van Themaat 1989). Their arguments, however coherent and elegant, are refuted by the evidence. It is a remarkable but verifiable fact of interlinguistics that the present accepted meaning or connotations of a word in Esperanto, or the nuanced use of a morpheme, can often differ from those to be found in the standard monolingual dictionary of the language or in the usage of its early speakers (Piron 1989). A cultured Esperanto speaker will further have at least passing acquaintance with a corpus of standard original and translated works and with the basic history of the language, knowledge of which is passed on through formal means (examinations), semi-formal means (seminars and popular books) and by interpersonal contact. There is thus an autonomous lexical and cultural core which is probably more coherent than that of many larger but less literate language communities around the world. Admittedly, at the periphery of the language there are undoubtedly interference effects caused by contact with the native ethnic language of the speakers. These however invariably disappear as

the topics or the speakers move towards the centre of international discourse. There seem to be no reasons in principle why the same phenomenon should not work on a much larger scale, should Esperanto come to be accepted as a major means of international communication in Europe or elsewhere.

The existence of this independent cultural base, or 'semantics', may seem however to partially negate Esperanto's second claim, of cultural neutrality. Indeed, a criticism perhaps more often heard is that its largely Romance vocabulary and European social base disqualify Esperanto as a genuine world language. If this were true, it might be seen as working to its credit in a purely European context. Language functions to establish identity as well as unity, and a common European language that was unacceptable to the rest of the world might have a special appeal and dynamic within the continent. But Esperanto, unfortunately as it were, is much more a world than a European tongue. There are several interesting aspects to the question, which has been and indeed still is a contentious issue within the movement itself.

Lexically and historically, Esperanto is undoubtedly European. (It is indeed doubtful whether any other part of the world has independently developed the concept of a planned interlanguage, while any a posteriori project seeking global recognition is obliged to base itself largely on Indo-European roots, whose native speakers make up approximately one-half of the world population.) Yet linguistically this is counterbalanced by an a priori syntactic morphology, wholly without analogy among Indo-European languages, and culturally by a universalistic ideological base. These two features in fact interact in a fascinating way. There is a widespread feeling that the basic lexicon of Esperanto should be restricted as much as possible, within the limits of clarity and expressiveness, and that maximum use should be made of the language's word-building potential. Such opinions are usually linked to the principle of 'simplicity' or ease of learning, and an explicit appeal is often made to the supposed needs of non-European speakers for whom the vocabulary presents a more important obstacle than for most Europeans.

This is not to say that an opposing stream of thought has not been present in the Esperanto community from the very beginning. Polemical debates over 'neologisms' – which are sometimes genuinely new, but often are rarer, stylistically marked words for which a 'simpler' alternative exists – have aroused passion throughout the movement's history. A major prescriptivist school, responsible for pioneering studies on Esperanto word formation and sentence structure (Schubert 1989, pp. 257-265), succeeded in codifying the European norms of the language in a radical departure from the protean nature of the Fundamental Grammar. Yet the effect seems to have been minimal and

temporary (Wood 1987). Not only has the language retained its non-European characteristics, but the rhetoric of the important organisations in the movement and its most influential figures has remained obstinately globalist. A recent increase in participation outside Europe, including World Congresses in Brazil and China, has strengthened this trend. The available evidence suggests that an overwhelming majority of Esperanto speakers see their language as a global one. On this view, any contribution it might make to solving the language problem in Europe, while important, is essentially incidental to the wider goal. Whether this will make Esperanto more or less acceptable within Europe is unclear.

As a final point on neutrality, it should be noted that Esperanto does not suffer from Dasgupta's contradiction on second language creativity. Unlike English, whose norms are defined by its native speakers, Esperanto's norms – which in any case are less restrictive – are defined by translingual interaction, in which any speaker from any country can play a part. This is undoubtedly one of the reasons for the affective bond formed with the language by many speakers. Another is that the flexible structure of the language is genuinely suited to creative use (Piron 1987, 1989). Yet the practical weaknesses of such a community are evident. English as a voluntary second language may lack the ability to put down strong roots, but the force of circumstances keeps it firmly in place; Esperanto, whatever its theoretical strengths, lacks the advantages of a geographical centre and a 'captive' body of speakers. The organisational and educational problems that this entails, the sectarian tendencies it encourages and the non-standard membership it attracts have been adequately chronicled in the case of the British movement by Forster (1982). Sceptics may conclude that Esperanto has yet to prove its ability to function at significant levels, and that any question of its serving as a single European language is premature at best. Let us therefore look at what the future may hold in store.

Although the gulf between the present positions of English and Esperanto gapes wide, the choice between them is by no means a foregone conclusion. On the one hand, the minority status of Esperanto presents an enormous obstacle to its political acceptance as a major language of international communication. On the other, as we have seen, English also faces grave political difficulties, although these have so far provided little hindrance to its spread. Will future developments favour one language or the other, neither, or both? As long as international communication continues to increase, the position of at least some world languages will be strengthened, but there are unforeseeable factors involved. Many people are now learning Japanese who twenty years ago would never have entertained the notion; the shift of economic power towards Asia is

continuing. A later date may see an increase in influence of the Spanish-speaking countries, whose language is technically far more suited to international communication than English. And the great imponderable of information technology – machine translation – may change all the equations (Tonkin 1986). These developments will directly affect the language situation in Europe, for the simple reason that English has no naturally privileged place among European languages: its popularity stems in large part from external factors. It cannot be doubted that English will retain a place among the most important European and world languages for the foreseeable future. Yet it enjoys no guarantee of permanent supremacy.

Esperanto, by contrast, already holds a truly privileged position, albeit one with many material disadvantages. As a planned international language with a genuine speech community it has no rivals, nor does it seem likely that such will arise (see Blanke 1985, and below). Its position depends on the conditions for international communication, but relatively little on the economic and political balance of power – except insofar as a more equal distribution of that power directly favours the use of a language which belongs to no one particular group. The rise of a politics of equality on the European and the world scale makes it ever more plausible that Esperanto will find a wider role to play.

This is indeed the crux of the debate. From the Europe of the last two centuries has come not only the concept of human equality, but also the realisation that equality in social relations can only be consciously achieved, by planning and not by accident. The social movements that seek to translate this realisation into action will find in Esperanto an ideal ally. English, by its nature, represents the forces of inertia, of 'naturalness': not because its use is exclusively the perogative of conservatives, but because it avoids the question of choice and thereby inevitably privileges some individuals and groups above others. Naturalism is dying a hard death, it must be admitted, in European politics as in European culture. Yet if it indeed is chronically ill, such vigorous hybrids of rationalism and pragmatism as Esperanto may find ideal conditions for growth in its place.

Other such hybrids are imaginable. This century has seen two major movements for the reform of English to make it more suited for a global role. Both enjoyed impressive intellectual support (George Bernard Shaw left his fortune to the reform of English spelling, I. A. Richards dedicated his considerable talents to the cause of Basic English); both are now moribund. Yet the changes in consciousness outlined above could breathe new vigour into such efforts. Closer to the Esperanto end of the spectrum, it is possible to envisage international collaboration on an adaptation or synthesis of existing

languages, closer to 'Standard Average European' than Esperanto; this, too, has been tried, with the International Auxiliary Language Association (1924-1951) and its brainchild Interlingua (see Large 1985, pp. 145-155). The fundamental problem which such projects face is in bringing the resulting construct to life. Both Basic English and Interlingua saw limited usage in their heyday, and both perhaps still 'survive' in the sense of having a handful of speakers, but neither has come close to the range of countries, social and personal circumstances and purposes in which Esperanto has been used (Blanke 1985, 1989). Much has been written, mostly in Esperanto, on the possible reasons for this; but it is perhaps enough to remind ourselves that language is a uniquely complex social and psychological phenomenon which we are far from understanding in an analytical sense, even while we use it to write and read these words. To create a language demands a extraordinary coincidence of historical and cultural circumstance, talent, instinct and sheer luck.

There can be no absolute ruling out of other solutions to the problem of a single European language, but the two poles defined by Martinet do indeed illuminate the problem. I hope to have shown the main ways in which the two languages concerned differ from one another, and that the synchronic dominance of one may presently hide the diachronic dynamism of the other. We are not, obviously, talking of the short term or of an abrupt transition. Languages do not come or go in a few years; their waxing and waning occurs on the time scale of generations. English has obeyed this rule, and Esperanto, for all its planned characteristics, inevitably will as well. The reasons are psychological (a radical concept needs time to be assimilated in popular consciousness), political (few politicians will support an idea which does not clearly have popular support) and practical (consider but the difficulties of teaching the language which would follow on its sudden acceptance). All these are linked with the development of cultural consciousness in Europe as a whole. There is nothing automatic about the process, and there is as yet no way of saying whether it will last two generations or twenty. But if the great tides of individualism and rationalism which began their surge some 25 generations ago continue to carry European consciousness onward, then the balance of a single European language will tip away from acceptance of the hazards of history towards a language embodying the human capacity for creation, choice and freedom.

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